Research Program

Energy Resources

Ernest L. Majer

510/486-6709
elmajer @lbl.gov

The Energy Resources Program (ER) is responsible for two major program areas: Oil and Gas Exploration and Development, and Geothermal Energy Development.

OIL AND GAS EXPLORATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Multidisciplinary research is being conducted in reservoir characterization and monitoring, optimization of reservoir performance, and environmental protection. Using basic research studies as a source of innovative concepts, ER researchers seek to transform these concepts into tangible products of use to industry within a time frame consistent with today's rapid growth in technology. Reservoir characterization and monitoring involve development of new seismic and electromagnetic techniques focused at the interwell scale. Field acquisition, laboratory measurements, and numerical simulation play important roles in the development activities. Optimization of reservoir performance is focused on simulation-based methods for enhancing reservoir management strategies. Emphasis is placed on the integration of geophysical data, production data, and reservoir simulation. The next major step in research will focus on methods to optimize performance through integration of monitored geophysical data, production data, and reservoir simulation.

International and national concern about the variable climatic effects of greenhouse gases produced by burning of fossil fuels is increasing, while it is also recognized that these fuels will remain a significant energy source well into the 21st century. In response to these concerns, ER has initiated research focused on development of technologies that will minimize the impact of fossil-fuel usage on the environment. Methane hydrates constitute a tremendous potential fuel source with lower carbon emissions than coal or oil. ER researchers are developing and evaluating possible methods for producing gas from such deposits. Geophysical data acquisition and inversion methods developed in the ER program are also being applied in a new project on geologic sequestration of CO_2 carried out in the Climate Change and Carbon Management Program within the Earth Sciences Division.

Principal research activities include:

- Development of microwell seismic technology, including instrumentation, acquisition, and processing
- Applications of seismic methods for characterization of fractured reservoirs
- Laboratory measurement of the seismic properties of poorly consolidated sands
- Evaluation of seismic stimulation methods and their application to different classes of oil reservoirs
- Improved inversion methods for reservoir characterization, with a focus on combining production and geophysical data
- Application of x-ray computed tomography and nuclear magnetic resonance imaging to study multiphase flow processes
- Pore-to-laboratory-scale study of physical properties and processes, with a focus on controlling phase mobility, predicting multiphase flow properties, and increasing drilling efficiency
- Development of new methods to mitigate environmental effects of petroleum refining and use
- Enhancement of refining processes using biological technologies
- Numerical simulation of subsurface methane hydrate systems

Since 1994, the major part of the Oil and Gas Exploration and Development program has been funded through the

Natural Gas and Oil Technology Partnership Program. Begun in 1989, the partnership was expanded in 1994 and again in 1995 to include all nine Department of Energy multiprogram laboratories, and has grown over the years to become an important part of the DOE Oil and Gas Technologies program for the national laboratories. Partnership goals are to develop and transfer to the domestic oil industry the new technologies needed to produce more oil and gas from the nation's aging, mature domestic oil fields, while safeguarding the environment.

Partnership technology areas are:

- Oil and gas recovery technology
- Diagnostics and imaging technology
- Drilling, completion, and stimulation
- Environmental technologies
- Downstream technologies

GEOTHERMAL ENERGY DEVELOPMENT

There are two main objectives of ER's geothermal energy development program: (1) to reduce uncertainties associated with finding, characterizing, and evaluating geothermal resources, and (2) to develop and understand the enhancement of current geothermal systems to significantly increase production. The ultimate purpose is to lower the cost of geothermal energy for electrical generation or direct uses (e.g., agricultural and industrial applications, aquaculture, balneology). The program encompasses theoretical, laboratory, and field studies, with an emphasis on a multidisciplinary approach to solving the problems at hand. Existing tools and methodologies are upgraded, and new techniques and instrumentation are developed for use in the areas of geology, geophysics, geochemistry, and reservoir engineering. Cooperative work with industry, universities, and government agencies draws from Berkeley Lab's 25 years of experience in the area of geothermal research and development.

In recent years, DOE's geothermal program has become more industry-driven, and the Berkeley Lab effort has been directed toward technology transfer and furthering our understanding of the nature and dynamics of geothermal resources under production.

At present, the main research activities of the program include:

- Geothermal Reservoir Dynamics: development and enhancement of computer codes for modeling heat and mass transfer in porous and fractured rocks, with specific projects such as modeling the migration of phase-partitioning tracers in boiling geothermal systems; modeling of mineral dissolution and precipitation during natural evolution, production, and injection operations; and geophysical-signature prediction of reservoir conditions and processes
- Isotope Geochemistry: identification of past and present heat and fluid sources, development of natural tracers for monitoring fluids re-injected into geothermal reservoirs, better understanding of the transition from magmatic to geothermal production fluids, and enhancement of reservoir-simulation methods and models by providing isotopic and chemical constraints on fluid source, mixing, and flow paths
- Geochemical Baseline Studies: documentation of geothermal-fluid behavior under commercial production and injection operations (e.g., field case studies), with specific emphasis on The Geysers field in Northern California
- Electromagnetic Methods for Geothermal Exploration: development of efficient numerical codes for mapping high-permeability zones, using single-hole electromagnetic data

Future research will concentrate on the development of innovative techniques for geothermal exploration and assisting in a reassessment of geothermal power potential in the U.S. The emphasis will be on expanding existing fields, prolonging their productive life, and finding new "blind" geothermal systems, i.e., those that do not have any surface manifestations, such as hot springs, fumaroles, etc., that suggest the presence of deeper hydrothermal systems.

FUNDING

Within ER, The Oil and Gas Exploration and Development program receives support from the Assistant Secretary for Fossil Energy, Office of Natural Gas and Petroleum Technology, through the National Energy Technology Laboratory, the National Petroleum Technology Office, and the Natural Gas and Oil Technology Partnership, under U.S Department of Energy Contract No. DE-AC03-76SF00098. Support is also provided from industry and other sources through the Berkeley Lab Work for Others program. Industrial collaboration is an important component of DOE Fossil Energy projects.

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